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EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 A.M. E.D.T. May 1, 2002

With nation challenged to boost early learning and literacy, study finds a huge child care workforce waiting to be trained

A new study demonstrates the challenge facing the nation in carrying out the goal President Bush announced last month to give every young child a jump start on literacy.

The workers the nation must rely on to boost early learning are detailed in the study: the 2.3 million people who are paid to take care of America's preschoolers and make sure they are prepared to learn in school.

Two-thirds of this vast workforce lacks college training, and finding qualified new caregivers will take a huge national investment, say the authors of the study, which was commissioned by the federal government to provide a more thorough and accurate analysis of the nation's child care workforce.

"More complete counts were needed to ensure that appropriate resources are available as policymakers develop initiatives to improve skills and quality," said study co-author Marci Young of the Center for the Child Care Workforce, a Washington, D.C. research and advocacy group.

The findings show that millions of caregivers will need training if children are to get an earlier start on learning, added co-author Richard Brandon, director of the Human Services Policy Center at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs.

Early learning was one of the few domestic goals mentioned in Bush's State of the Union speech, and in April he laid out a \$45 million plan to strengthen the federal role and spread public awareness.

The new study, however, shows that about half of America's child care providers take care of toddlers age 18-36 months, suggesting that caregiving and teaching skills for that group also should become a major focus of professional training.

"Children devour learning at that age," Brandon said. "It's crucial that the people

taking care of them be as qualified as possible, and we're facing a shortage of qualified caregivers.”

Unlike certified K-12 teachers, child care workers have been hard to track. States vary in how they count them – especially home-based providers and relatives. Instead of relying on state reporting and other partial tallies, the CCW/UW team drew on the 1999 National Household Education Survey, in which parents in 6,939 households described in detail their usage of child care services.

The researchers found that 2.3 million people are paid to care for children 0-5, a number substantially larger than estimates derived from previous Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census Bureau surveys, which ranged from 700,000 to 1.7 million caregivers for all children through age 12.

Many of the previously uncounted workers are relatives paid as regular caregivers – often full time – but often unlicensed. The researchers found that this group makes up a full third of the child care workforce. Overall, the Labor Department says that child care is one of the fastest-growing occupations of the decade – a distinction shared with computer programmers and nurses – and is expected to grow twice as fast as the average occupation over the next several years.

Brandon and Young – along with UW colleague Erin Maher and Alice Burton, Marcy Whitebook, Dan Bellm and Claudia Wayne of the Center for the Child Care Workforce – conducted the \$249,000, two-year study with a grant from the Child Care Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children, Youth and Families.

Center for the Child Care Workforce has performed research and advocacy for more than 20 years documenting low wages and high turnover among child care workers and demonstrating the relationship between the quality of child care jobs and services.

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